

## Embracing change: Women in midlife

Several decades ago a typical description of midlife might have been "a time when everything turned gray." But a review of the current literature related to midlife would indicate that this is not necessarily the perception today.

The greater majority of contemporary studies have been done by social scientists. Their studies focus on questions such as 1) how to stop living for everyone else—and start living for yourself, 2) how to rediscover your ambitions and fulfill them, 3) how to awaken the pleasures you were too busy to notice, and 4) how to accept and enjoy the prerogatives you've earned. These are relevant questions, but a framework that includes the spiritual dimension would be helpful.

In the book, *The Seasons of Life*, Paul Tournier provides this framework by stating that as God's creation we must uphold the connectedness between the body and the spirit. Iris Ford in her book, *Life Spirals: The Faith Journey*, attempts to bridge the midlife period of secular and faith worlds by entitling this period as the "Extra Self" transition. Her explanation is needed. This transition is a time when we need to look at our life and "own it." To do this we must be honest with self; we must be without pretense. She adds that

this midlife stage transports us from "others" to "within" (the self). Ford builds on Eriksons' psychosocial model of developmental tasks.

Others would agree with Ford's analysis that midlife is a time of renewal, of reevaluation, of sifting values. Because women at midlife will "pass this way but once," some writers caution, "don't blow it"; hence midlife is oft referred to as a crisis. Rightly so. It is a time of looking both ways—forward and backward.

A note here pertaining to the age bracket of midlife. Our operational definition is about 40 to 60 years of age. Most writers would agree that the line is rather invisible. For some women midlife may begin at age 35, for others, mid 40s. The ending would also be a fluid line. But here is my point: although I found no studies to support my thinking (but my literature review was scant), should we not at this time in history consider the age bracket for midlife to be 50 to 70? Do we not all agree that many young adults postpone leaving home or getting married to a much later age than several decades ago? And do not the elderly push the 90s with some ease? True, just because the young adult and the elderly extend their age bracket does not mean the midlife bracket should shift, but perhaps we should think and talk about it.

The emphasis of the remainder of this article will be an attempt to think comprehensively about midlife (as opposed to the selected specific aspects touched on in the following articles). David Maitland's book, *Life's Spirals: The Faith Journey*, has impacted my thinking. In no way does

Maitland belittle the physiopsychosocial aspect of midlife, but in holding to the thread of "... a theology of midlife," he does an awesome piece of holistic writing. He helps us to see midlife as the stage in our development when we as Christians are particularly sensitive to the deeper questions about the meaning of life. By utilizing this comprehensive and holistic approach, that is, drawing on principles not only of theology but also of psychology, counselling and faith development, he provides women in midlife with sound insights.



One comes to midlife in a variety of ways, yet there are common denominators that characterize these sometimes subtle experiences. There is a certain cluster of losses, but one must not stop here. One should be equally alert to latent gains that usually follow these losses. Women in midlife readily admit to the empty nest syndrome, or other losses such as the deaths of family members or friends, or the loss of those who move away. But Maitland uncovers for us other more covert losses—of absolute certainty, of invulnerability, and of single-mindedness. Many women in midlife must deal with some overwhelming health or other problem; sometimes our own inadequacies loom great. Also, we may find that the pure-mindedness and commitment that characterized the days of our youth are inadequate at midlife. Maitland reminds us that our ambivalences are most often coming from within us, and not coming from others.

Our obvious and not so obvious losses in midlife have a way of eroding our identity. We are no longer so sure of the self-image we want to display to others. There may be a separation between our past and present. Our attitudes towards many of life's basics—food, work, sex, etc.—are subject to change in the middle years; how we responds to these changes/losses is what is at stake. God may be both our peace and at the same time our "great disturber."

Those in midlife need to think of embracing these changes/losses as a potential for future good; at the same time our frailties/inadequacies must be admitted. This may seem at times like "lack of control," when others hope to see in us a tower of strength. But according to the Psalmist we do have the promise of attaining wise hearts, that is, if we number our days right (Psalms 90:12). This will keep us moving forward. But it is not always easy, especially when society is constantly flaunting the values of youth.

One suggestion to keep us moving in God's direction is to embrace some vision, goal or concept of empowerment. Each person's vision will vary, but I value the perspective that there is far more to me than my previous perceived identity—my work, family role, etc. One reason I can say this is because of Scripture passages such as 1 Cor. 15:10: "... by the grace of God I am what I am." The closer I am to my Initiator, the One ever working for my good, the more I know who I am; for this gracious God accepts me and I have nothing more to prove. But I must remain teachable, and some lessons will need to be relearned many times. And

again, what will I do with the information I have been taught? Will this information assure me to act? Also, I remind myself that there were struggles in my youth and in my post midlife transitions.

Information may not always lead to the will to implement that information. But for me it is helpful to break the "moving forward" down into small steps. To do/make something regardless how small it is prevents stagnation. Maitland would concur with this. In fact, he writes a whole chapter on two extremes—perfectionism and resignation. We will be empowered to do/make something, however modest that may be.

In conclusion, one might say that the working out of life's stages, including midlife, is an inescapable opportunity for every woman, especially those of the Christian faith. We are to see life ever more fully and in its entirety. This includes accepting change, although not necessarily believing the more change we experience the better. Change, too, must come in moderation.

One final note. Seeing life in its entirety will help us to view change as something positive. True, momentary change/loss may mean death to certain things, but after that comes the, "Behold, I make all things new" (Rev. 21:5). The "new things" may come in little parts, but it is valuable to watch for the accumulation of the little new things. I can assure you they will be in the direction of blending with the prophet Jeremiah (31:11) when he spoke to the Israelites in Babylonian exile, "For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you a hope and a future." This promise is also for women in midlife.

—Susan Kehler, compiler

**Susan Kehler was a nurse for most of 25 years spent in Taiwan, and in the early 1980s in Bethel College, Newton, Kansas. Later she served as director of care in Menno Home, Abbotsford, B.C. She is active at Emmanuel Mennonite Church in Abbotsford as a deacon and was a volunteer at Open Door for Single Mothers in 1995. In January, 1996, she and her husband Peter left for a 6- to 8-month assignment in the Ukraine under the Commission of Overseas Mission.**



Remember always that you have not only the right to be an individual but have an obligation to be one.

—Eleanor Roosevelt

by Marietta Sawatsky

## Empty nest overseas

“So you will have an empty nest when you return to Taiwan?” The question had been asked frequently during our year in North America until it seemed like a broken record. The question often implied feelings of guilt. We were leaving our three adult children to return to missionary service in Taiwan, rather than our children leaving parents and home as the traditional family does. The fierce repetition of the question created doubts. Is there no life for us as parents after our children are gone from the nest?

At the same time I tuned an ear to wise parents with more experience in facing this transition time. They restated that “you must let your children go.” This is most important for them to become mature, to find God’s will for their lives as responsible young adults. With admiration, I recalled the example of my own parents who were willing to let me go as a young adult to faraway places for periods of service.

I experienced what Jan Silvius states so well in the article, “When Your Child Leaves Home” in the Jan.–Feb. 1993 issue of *Today’s Christian Women*: “Remember letting go is a struggle. Your head says, ‘Letting go is healthy.’ Your heart says, ‘It hurts too much so it can’t be right.’ . . . Realize letting go is a process. Just because you’ve let go before doesn’t mean it automatically becomes easier the next time! But each time you go through the process, it reinforces the truth that you can trust the Lord with your child’s life.”

I also believe the “letting go” has been a gradual process, beginning when our first daughter left for college. While experiencing pain with the departure of each child, we prepare ourselves for the inevitable “empty nest.”

By living overseas the struggle is compounded by the fact that we are absent from our children for extended periods, usually one to two years. We cannot anticipate the traditional holiday gatherings with our children and extended family. Yet the compensations in this unique situation cannot be minimized. Because our children grew up in Taiwan, it has become their adopted country. Their exposure to a different culture has broadened their world view and continues to influence their lives in areas such as career choices and the friends with whom they associate.

At present we and our three children find it satisfying to communicate via e-mail. In today’s world, where one usually picks up the telephone, writing is both a skill and a discipline. The message may be either a short note or a longer, detailed journal. It is communicated deliberately, not haphazardly. While we give encouragement from a distance, we also invest trust in our children to live responsibly in their respective situations.

As parents in our particular work, we have the advantage of sharing as a team in our mission service, whether it be a pastoral role in Taiwan or itineration in North America. This detracts from thoughts of loneliness or an empty house.

In dealing with this life change, I determined in my mind to use a positive approach, even though my heart had its doubting moments. I strove to make our physical “nest” in a high-rise apartment building attractive for us and those who visit. More importantly, my husband and I are making an effort to fill the “empty nest” with people around us who also need the security of home and parents.

Our young Taiwanese church has many young people who are living away from their families due to education or employment. Once or twice a month we invite them for a game night, perhaps a carry-over of our own family’s Friday fun night. Saturday afternoon English classes meet around our dining room table. It is a friendly atmosphere to practice English conversation.

Jr-Hsu is a young person who is helping to fill the “empty nest.” At age 21, about the same age as our own son, he is studying design as a first year college student. Since he was 15 years old, he has been in Taiwan, away from his own family who lives on an off-shore island. To whom can he turn for guidance when he faces the difficulties of life—boy/girl relationships, discouragement in school work, the usual problems of everyday living? Jr-Hsu stops frequently to share his concerns, sometimes while eating his rice box lunch. Though we cannot take the place of his parents, we

Service isn't a big thing. It is a million little things.  
—Anonymous

hope to stand in the gap and be encouragers during these years of crucial decision-making. One gains the sense of Christian family, which transcends cultural barriers.

Beside the Taiwanese, we also encounter expatriates who are looking for “family” connections in a home away from home. Their reasons for being in Taiwan vary from studying the Chinese language, engaging in business or flying for airlines. As our time permits, we try to offer friendship to these people in a strange, foreign environment.

While we have the opportunity to open our nest to people in Taiwan, we are grateful to those who open their homes and hearts to our children while their parents are gone. They have been helped in college years and beyond by extended family and the Christian family.

Jesus' words still ring true in our 20th century society. “Give and it will be given to you . . . For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you” (Luke 6:38). As we share our home during the “empty nest” years, in return we and our children are blessed beyond measure.

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by Ruth Klaassen

## Discovering silent listening prayer

Thomas Merton wrote, “When I am liberated by silence, when I am no longer involved in the measurement of life, but in the living of it, I can discover a form of prayer in which there is effectively, no distraction. My whole life becomes a prayer. My whole silence is full of prayer.”

I read this quotation many years ago. It came as a gift to me during those years when I was too busy to pray, yet was most in need of prayer. The noise of the city surrounded and invaded me. The material world of modern technology, personal ambitions, social events and amusements, and all those immediate responsibilities of caring for three small children and a household occupied all my waking minutes. I was crowded into the notion that I was using my hours to the very best of my ability and that being busy somehow meant that I was not wasting my time or talents. These words of Thomas Merton forced me at that time to question my lifestyle, but there was never time to think through the idea of being “liberated by silence,” let alone give it a try.

The occasion came when we moved to the Okanagan Valley in British Columbia. Our house sits high above the Okanagan Lake with the world of humanity below us and God's rich creation of wilderness all around us. The nights are wonderfully dark with a clear dome of stars. When the moon rises over the opposite mountains the whole lake takes on new life and the forests glow. The morning sun rises to shed brilliant color on a silent world. It was in this setting that I had the good fortune to spend 14 weeks alone when my husband had returned to Ontario to teach one university term and my sons were at their respective universities. I was alone. It was so silent and still that I felt I was in a new world, and indeed I was. Now was the time for me to turn my attention to the idea I had received from Thomas Merton.

It would be misleading to say that those first few days were comfortable. I was restless. But, always before me came the idea of “entering into silence” where, beyond all anxieties and noise, silence offered me a spiritual depth about which I knew very little. I wanted to go there.

**Don't be afraid your life will end; be afraid that it will never begin.**

**—Grace Hansen**

First off I read some "how to" books. That is how we do things these days! How to contemplate, how to pray, how to meditate, how to listen to God are only a few of the "self-helps," which were good books with good advice. But they were not for me because, as I came to realize, I had not accepted nor entered into silence itself. In other words, the busy world was still with me. The schools, churches, malls, homes, eating places, theaters and everywhere I had gone was dominated by noise and chatter. My prayers were always me speaking to God and there were no silent spaces for listening. This had been my experience in life and now how was I to break away from it and be still?

It is easy to get away from the noise and busyness. It can be done any time or place. The problem is that we can go to quietness yet not yield to it. I had retreated to silence yet could not "yield." Silence was still that space between noise and activity; it was simply a vacuum. Silence was that place where nothing happens and when we try to go there we are accused of selfish idleness.

Merton's words had led me to believe that "silence" held more for me than frustration. With this at the center of my thoughts I came to regard this time alone as a spiritual retreat where two goals emerged—one was "retirement" and the other "yield." I needed to fully retire from my busy world and I needed to learn how to yield to whatever retirement would bring. This was not a leap in the dark, as I had utmost faith in the reality of the spiritual world.

To help me realize these goals I listened to good, quiet spiritual music. To my surprise the music of the Russian Orthodox church became important. I read out loud the prayers and liturgies of my mother church. I read poetry out loud. Words by authors such as Merton were as gentle hands that lifted me out of my need for noise. Nature played a vital role in my retreat. Like a healing balm it flowed through me as I entered the quiet mysteries of spaces that were not contaminated by human "progress." The mountains, forest, wild creatures, mushrooms, insects and flowers and the endless number of gifts from nature's store were mine to discover. The gentle physical contact with birds, squirrels and chipmunks as they came to be fed calmed my busy hands.

As these experiences became integral parts of me they moved me ever so gently into a calmer attitude. I no longer felt restless. At the start of this retreat I forced myself to be still—now I wanted ever longer hours of silence. The Syrian Monk, Isaac of Nineveh, in teaching about silence says, "In the beginning we have to force ourselves to be silent. But then there is born something that draws us to silence." This was my experience.

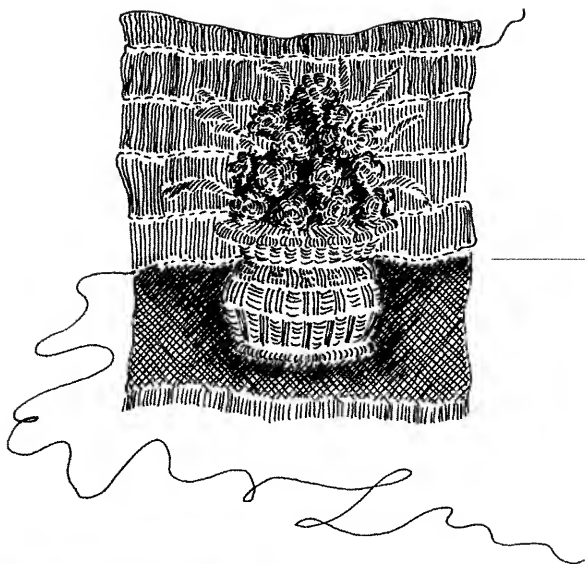
By now it was not just the realization of silence that was to nurture me, rather, the silence itself was something new. It became a way of prayer. Because there was in stillness no need to measure myself, to pit myself against the world or create some image, I was freed to accept a new resolve for meekness which was a meekness of submission to God and humility before God. With this came a more ready willingness to listen silently to God and for God. Silent, listening prayer can only be described as "resting in God." I no longer struggled to hear a voice, or even feel something special, for it was enough to trust and rest in the silence.

I cannot adequately describe "silence" nor take anyone along on this kind of retreat, partly because I am still in process, still searching and waiting, and partly because we take this kind of journey alone with God. It isn't easy but it is rewarding because:

Silence gets the "self" out of the way,  
Silence in God means being nourished by God alone,  
Silence means being influenced by nothing other than God,  
Silence means hearing that which is spoken by God.

**Ruth Klaassen is a grandmother, enjoying a quiet life in Vernon, B.C. She is involved in peace research and attends All Saints Anglican Church in Vernon.**





by Jessie Kehler

## The compelling forces of midlife

Midlife brings with it its own turmoil, excitement, inner yearnings and urgings of the inner spirit. Questions such as "Who am I?" "What is life all about?" and "Where am I going?" are all indications of a search for meaning and purpose in life. These inner nudgings either propel us to growth and change or cause us to resist and stagnate.

Socrates said, "The unexamined life is not worth living," and Jesus said, "If you grasp and cling to life on your own terms you'll lose it, but if you let that life go, you'll get life on God's terms" (From *The Message*, by Eugene Peterson).

In midlife I experienced compelling forces that urged me on to explore new things. To my surprise, new interests surfaced. But there was also a lot of negativity that pushed its face to the fore, such as fear of failure and the feeling of inadequacy.

The thought expressed by Dr. Ernest Fitzgerald, "To try and fail is not failure, but to never try is," was an interesting concept, giving me courage to face my fears. No longer being challenged at work was another motivator for change.

I made a cautious move by asking for a leave of absence from work to give me time to pursue a course in clinical pastoral education at Canadian Mennonite Bible College and to accept an invitation to become an interim coordinator of ministry at the Charleswood Mennonite Church in Winnipeg. Both possibilities were challenging. They helped

me to gain a better sense of what pastoral ministry would be like. The church community, close friends and family provided much encouragement and support.

It was a time of waiting and depending on the guidance of the Holy Spirit for wisdom and direction. Eight months later I resigned from my nursing position to pursue further pastoral clinical training, but not with the intent of going into it in a professional way. It was only after I completed my training and obtained my specialist standing that I decided to search for employment in the pastoral care field. I was hired by the Pastoral Care department of St. Boniface Hospital, Winnipeg, to work in Psychiatry, and later also in Chemical Dependency.

In retrospect I find that my midlife years were abundantly rewarding, filled with meaning and a great deal of learning. I learned a lot about pain, suffering and despair. When this condition remains unresolved it saps the person of life, but when this condition is transformed by grace it fills life with love, compassion and hope.

Recently a close friend said, "Grace has been like a thread running through my life. When I look back I see it in my worst times as the last thread I had to hang on to, and in my best times it was part of an elaborate tapestry."

Leaving nursing and entering pastoral care was quite a drastic switch. I recall how nervous, awkward and heavy-hearted I was when I met persons who were paralyzed, who couldn't communicate verbally. As a nurse I had several options; for example, I could offer a back rub, which is a way of showing care and compassion. As a pastoral care worker I had to ask myself: "What is my role?" Painfully I had to learn to be fully present to the patient. It meant learning to listen with my ears, eyes, heart and intuition. It meant listening to the silences, the pauses, the things that were said and those things left unsaid.

Working with psychiatric and chemically dependent clients, I found it was important for me to do ongoing introspective work (Step 4 and 5 in AA). Marie Fortune emphasizes that caregivers need to be "healed wounded healers." Sheldon Kopp says, "Nothing within ourselves can be changed until it is first accepted."



**A life spent in making mistakes is not only more honourable, but more useful than a life spent in doing nothing.**

**—George Bernard Shaw**

On my own spiritual pilgrimage towards personal worth and wholeness, which includes freedom with responsibility, respect and appreciation of self, I needed to accept both my strengths and weaknesses. This was a difficult task.

The need to be perfect and to wear a mask of perfection kept me from accepting my mistakes and sinfulness. It also kept me from acknowledging my assets. Kopp says, "If we flee from the evil in ourselves we do it at our hazard. All evil is potential vitality in need of transformation." The Psalmist writes, "Where can I go from your Spirit or where can I flee from your presence." Yes, God is always there, so we may as well share our real feelings and thoughts with the Sovereign One.

I still remember the day when I started to let go of my excessive accumulated negative baggage (guilt, pride, etc.). The day I accepted God's grace and forgiveness and appropriated it to myself was the day I could forgive myself and treat myself to gentleness. My inner spirit was freed to be creative, more spontaneous and carefree. Yes, I could begin to laugh at myself and allow others to laugh with me.

I was challenged to face my shadow and to develop my neglected "other side." I continue to work at this. Just writing this article bears witness to this fact. This also meant getting in touch with my "maleness"—the assertive and analytical side of my being.

Control was also an issue. It was a way of protecting myself from having people see my vulnerability and inadequacies. It has been freeing to own my creatureliness. I don't have to be perfect. Working with clients in the Twelve Step program was helpful in breaking down these barriers. There was no "they" and "I" but "us" and "we." It was a lesson in how we can surrender to God and allow the process to work.

As I reflect today on these past experiences I find I am in a totally different space. Years ago solitude to me meant isolation. I was too restless to be with myself. I needed the presence of people, and I needed to be "doing" all the time because this is what gave me worth.

Today I still appreciate people and I like doing things, but I find solitude energizing. I now enjoy taking time to contemplate, meditate, reflect and pray. I savor nature, music, books and many other things. In the past few years I have become more interested and involved in the area of Christian healing. I have been especially impressed with models that have been developed and used in the British Isles.

I am filled with awe at how gracious and patient God has been with me, allowing me to make mistakes and to learn from them. I am deeply grateful to patients who so often were my teachers and to so many people who have not only shared of their love and wisdom but who have been supportive sojourners with me.

There is a saying, "Blessed is the one who digs a well from which another can draw faith" (source unknown). I have been a recipient many times of the water from such wells. Perhaps midlife is all about digging wells.

**Jessie Kehler recently retired from St. Boniface Hospital, Winnipeg, Man., where she served as a chaplain. She and her husband, Larry, attend Charleswood Mennonite Church. They have a son, daughter, son-in-law and one grandchild.**



by Bek Linsenmeyer

## Cancer at midlife

While we were packing to leave for seminary my husband surprised me with a 40th birthday party. During the party my friend David asked how I would feel if the peak experiences of my life were behind me. He asked because we were wrapping up a peace comforter project that had been a wonderful experience for me as initiator and for our small Mennonite church.

That's not the kind of question I would have raised; I was in an onward and upward mode. We were on our way to seminary, having struggled with the call for several years. Our two children were both going to be in school all day, eliminating childcare difficulties, so it seemed like a whole new world was opening up.

And so it was for me. It was the most nurturing environment I'd ever experienced. I left Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary (Elkhart, Ind.) with many new understandings of God, of myself, of Christian community.

We came to Kansas with a strong sense that this was the place to be. Only four months into learning to live in the country, being a pastor's wife, I began having severe pain in my knee. I mark Thanksgiving Day as the day I couldn't walk without limping, the day it all began. It hurt enough for me to give in and go to the doctor that weekend. He put me in a leg immobilizer with instructions to pamper it. (Sure, just before Christmas.) I managed through Christmas, but on the way back home from a family Christmas trip to Nebraska the pain was back. The eventual diagnosis was lymphoma of the bone, and I started chemotherapy and radiation. I remember they said I had an 85 percent chance of cure. They made sure I understood this cancer was



very treatable. I remember the radiation oncologist saying I was there for cure, not for palliative treatment.

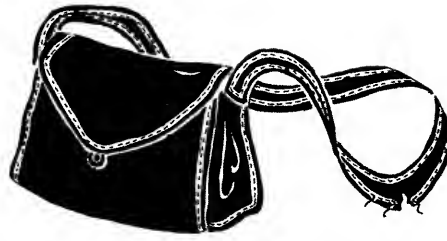
So I went through the weeks of chemo in Omaha, now on crutches and a leg immobilizer to protect the bone, which was 80 percent destroyed by the tumor and bone biopsy. They said I'd be on crutches five to six weeks, no weight on the left leg. Since I did not have any options, I had to manage that. Then they said I would be on crutches till the end of chemo. Ok, I'll do what I have to do. They said I'd be on crutches two to four months after I'd finished radiation. And on that day I started pulling into myself.

By that time I was weakened from chemo and I didn't walk on crutches anymore—I dragged myself around. Someone loaned me a book on depression. In the first pages I did get a good laugh going down the list of hallmarks of depression: "Are you unusually concerned about your health?" Yes, a bit more than usual. "Are you concerned about your appearance?" Well, yes, going to the MCC sale in a wheelchair, with a wig and a mask (because my white cell count was so low) did make me a little self-conscious. "Difficulty sleeping?" Yes, that, too; some of the chemo drugs are sleep disturbers. I can't remember all the questions, but it seemed that about half of them applied to chemo side effects. On the Saturday I lay in the hospital receiving transfusions I wondered if I would finish chemo before chemo finished me.

I went off of one drug and stayed awake more than 40 hours. After the second sleepless night I wanted to quit. My only option was to drag through another day, and I didn't see how I could do it. My husband Dean listened to me through my tears, crying with me, but saying he thought I needed to get up and take a shower and try to take one thing at a time. But I wanted God to be holding me and I felt bereft. I remember thinking during the night, "God, I want you to be carrying me, and I feel like you're on the other side of Bob Goering's field." It's not as if I had never had God's love proved before, in bad times, in crisis times, in good, rejoicing times. But I had a great fear of being unfaithful. What if I lost my faith? What if I did not know God's presence? There were no good options, so I crutched into the shower, crying as I sat there, but I remember thinking by the time I reached for the towel that I could make it through that day. After our children Eliot and Anna left for school, Dean took me out in the wheelchair for a walk.

It is not unusual to go for a mile on that country road without seeing anyone. But on that morning a van pulled up. It was Dean's spiritual director, just coming by to see Dean. They had missed many meetings because of Dean's taking me to





You don't get a choice how you're going to die, or when. You can only decide how you're going to live. Now.  
—Joan Baez

the doctor. Larry got out of the van; Dean introduced us. Larry asked how I was doing, and I, immediately tearful, admitted “not very well.” He asked if we could talk, and we agreed. As we walked back Dean asked if I felt God was caring for me, and I replied that there had never been a time when I had felt God’s care more. The way I frame it is that on the worst morning of my life God sent help. The conversation was helpful—Larry is a counselor who knows how to listen and comfort and encourage. But the fact that he came in the midst of my desolation is the great gift that I treasure.

This was not because I deserved help, but because God is gracious. In my weakness God did not scorn me but sent help. And from that time I began to go forward again. It meant making decisions about how I would respond to the situations I faced. For example, I decided that whether the radiation technicians treated me like a number or not, I would treat them like people. I began talking to them, asking for what I needed, suggesting that we should have posters on the ceiling for when we had to lay still (alone in that sealed-off “star trek” room). If that wasn’t possible then we should have a joke for the day. I knew that we had become people to each other when they started finding jokes each day.

On the day I finished radiation I also went back to the chemo oncologist. After taking X-rays I waited forever. I crutched back out to the waiting room to tell my ride I was still waiting, and down the long length of that waiting room came the doctor waving the X-rays in the air. His proclamation was “We’re going to let you start putting weight on that leg today; the bone is already healing!”

And so began the rehabilitation process—exercises and physical therapy to regain strength and mobility. During my treatment in Omaha I’d asked if I would be able to walk. They thought so, but didn’t know if I’d need a brace, crutches, cane or if I would limp.

I have been part of a cancer support group. The up side of a cancer support group was that these people had come through. The down side was how terrified they were of a recurrence. Around Thanksgiving I began to be able to articulate that I didn’t want having had cancer to be all my life was about. Two songs, “Today I live” and “Healer of our every ill,” (from *Hymnal: A Worship Book*) helped. One line from “Healer” expresses what I wanted: “Give us peace beyond our fear and hope beyond our sorrow.” I don’t want to deny what I experienced, and I do have to live with the possibility of a recurrence. But I don’t want fear to be my life. The first fall after treatment I debated with myself about buying a purse I liked—was it a waste of money? There was a period of wanting to believe in my life but fearing that there might be a recurrence. I finally went back and bought

the purse. I just noticed last week the shoulder strap is wearing out. Somehow that feels like a vote for my life.

When I was in treatment, one of my first morning thoughts was, “I have cancer.” I wondered if it would always be so much a part of my thinking. I talked about this to a woman who had a mastectomy, who said she never thought about it anymore. I was internally skeptical. How could you not think about it every morning when you put on your bra? But I longed for that acceptance to come to me. Long after that conversation I was cutting my toenails, thinking how limber my leg had gotten. Who would have thought it could get so limber after being so stiff? Then I pulled my other leg up and realized *this* was my stiff leg. I had forgotten which leg had had the tumor! I don’t know if another can understand how important that discovery was. It was in that moment that I knew I was healed.

The shock of cancer came to me at 43—early in midlife. Now I am 47 and I realize I view life differently than most women my age. Three phrases now carry great weight for me—“Dealing with ambiguity”; “How am I going to spend the rest of my life?”; and “The place God calls you to . . .”

1. Dealing with ambiguity. In North America we try to get rid of the ambiguities of life. We want to tie things down, plan them out, insure against loss. We want to make things safe, and we want to be able to trust our assumptions. Cancer very quickly proved to me/us that things will not necessarily go the way we expect. It’s a good lesson to learn. As I faced some job insecurity because of funding and integration, I realized I might not be quite comfortable with all the dynamics but I could see that this isn’t the central life issue. The surety is not the job but the God who will go with me through whatever I have to face.

2. I don’t know if friends are tired of me speaking of “how am I going to spend the rest of my life?” At a WM/WMSC meeting last year we were to respond to what we envisioned for ourselves in 10 years. I had to say that if I had another 10 years I would be able to see my children grow up. Life becomes more precious. When we were able to raft the Grand Canyon two summers ago it struck me, “I am here.” And I was flooded with emotion and thankfulness. I leaned up to my Anna and choked out the words, “Anna, I’m here.” And she, too, understood, squeezing my hand and saying with a smile, “I know, Mom.” This past summer we hiked in the Rockies, and as I was climbing I thought, “I get to do this!” During the sharing time in our Thanksgiving Day service Dean shared how thankful he was for our recent 25th anniversary trip, reflecting that there was a time when we didn’t know if we would see 25 years together. There may



be some sense of "living while you can" involved here. The stronger impulse is to value life more, to not take for granted what we are given.

Some have cringed at one of my books, *Ten Fun Things to do Before You Die* by Karol Jackrowski. I understand their cringing; I am afraid of the pain I might have to endure before I die, (so I got some helpful information about effective pain control for cancer patients), but it is also part of our culture not to face death. Jackrowski is talking about living while you live. One of her points is to have more fun than anyone else. I told Dan a couple of Easers ago that I wanted a duck. He, for some pretty crappy reasons, didn't. (Pun intended.) He got me a stuffed toy.

I finally told him that didn't cut it and I was going to get a duck. He capitulated and told me to get two. So I got Babe and Bilbo and we loved them. They were beautiful and white and they came to me and Bilbo let me pick him up and all the little kids (and big kids and parents) came over from church to see them and enjoyed them, too. (You don't want to know the part about the coyotes, do you?) My point is that I am living in the country and one thing I've always wanted was pets and now is the time to enjoy them. I want to minimize someday saying "I wish I had . . ."

3. The place God calls you to is where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet. This in my ongoing life quest. I asked it at seminary when I considered the next step; I asked it here of my work. What is my deep gladness? And what part of the world's deep hunger is mine to address? Every once in a while I get some intimation that what I am doing helps women, but I must acknowledge that the most fulfilling times for me are the face-to-face encounters.

Recently I did two seminars at a rural women's conference. I was to be one of the "more inspirational" speakers for the weekend. In each group a woman came afterwards and shared that she had had cancer and how she had received encouragement from my words. This is a wonderful gift to me. I have had people share that before and I am so thankful to be used in their lives. The comment that I will most treasure came from a woman who came to me and hugged me and whispered "my journey back to God will be easier because of what you have said this morning." To my friend David who asked how I would feel if I'd already peaked, I'd have to say that there is nothing more precious than being told I've helped someone on their journey back to the Source.

**Bek Linsenmeyer lives with her family in the country, next door to Hoffnungsau Mennonite Church in Inman, Kan. She is editor of *Window to Mission*, the publication of Women in Mission (GC). She speaks at churches, retreats, conferences and workshops.**

by Marlee Andres

## Whose plans? Singleness at midlife

I have struggled with writing this article. For some reason I could never find the right direction, the right illustration, and so tonight I have sat down to do what I do best—to tell you a story.

I had special plans for this Christmas. Throughout my twenties I lived away from home, and family gatherings were the domain of my mother and sisters-in-law. They would call and I was always invited, but I never felt fully included. No one ever called and told me we were getting together for a picnic and could I bring the potato salad or that we were celebrating a birthday and could I bring desert. Somehow I always felt a little excluded. Once the planning was done I was informed and that was that.

This Christmas, though, was going to be different. I had a good job, was settled into a nice apartment, and Christmas was going to be at my house! More than just getting to be hostess I felt like I would finally be taking an adult role in my family, giving instead of getting, planning instead of merely participating.

Gifts were meticulously chosen to reflect something special in the receiver. A dinner was planned and decorations chosen. I found a beautiful piece of Christmas fabric for a tablecloth and matching candles. Lots of tinsel and bright colored garland would finish the picture.

For months I planned, made notes, budgeted, and dreamed about my perfect Christmas. Then the first week in December I lost my job. Like one of the ornate glass balls falling from the tree, my perfect Christmas was in shattered pieces at my feet.

I railed at God. Why me? Why this year? This isn't what I wanted and not what I'd planned for!

I cannot tell you how often I have heard those same words spoken by single women as they face the passing years. I've seen longing looks on friends' faces as young mothers

**The only lasting trauma is the one we suffer without positive change.**

**—by Leo Buscaglia, in “Born for Love”**

walked by with sleeping babies in strollers. I’ve seen and heard (and experienced) the frustration of returning to an empty apartment at the end of a long and frustrating day. This is not what I planned, not what I want and not fair!

Have you ever found yourself struggling with those thoughts, trying to still some unnamed ache deep inside? I certainly have, and I certainly don’t think I’m unique.

It hurt to watch the Christmas I had dreamed of giving my family vanish. I felt cheated and angry, but nothing slips through the cracks with God. Even in the midst of all my plans and dreams God knew that those plans would fail and I would be hurt. But perhaps the best lesson in both the Christmas creche and Calvary’s cross is the extremes to which our loving Abba will go to meet us right where we’re at, in all our humanity and hurts, both petty and profound.

I can write off this Christmas (in my heart at least) and go through the motions while my stinging soul keeps up a constant litany of the wrongs I’ve suffered, or I can enter in. I can find a different path, different ways to give, new plans, and in the end, new hope and God’s whispered “well done” as I close my eyes in sleep Christmas night.

Single women can deny their plans and hopes and feelings and go through the motions of life while their stinging souls offer constant reminders of the lonely days and nights they’ve suffered, or they can enter into their singleness with purpose and vitality. They can find new paths through relationships; different, challenging and exciting new ways

to contribute to their churches and communities; new plans of ministry and vocation and recreation; and in the end they too can hear the whispered “well done” of their Abba-Papa.

I had plans for Christmas, but having lost them, I can still see “The Plan” for Christmas, and that makes this Christmas worthwhile.

As single women watching the years pass, we often have to watch our plans fall away, but if we keep our eyes lifted to the One who says that He has plans for us, plans to prosper us and give us a hope and future (see Jer. 29.11), then our singleness, though still lonely and difficult at times, is in His hands and in His care. Our hopes and dreams have not slipped past His attention.

Perhaps no story makes the point more clearly than Elisabeth Elliot’s confession after her husband’s martyrdom. Of Jim’s death she writes: “God is God. That was the most stunning lesson of the most stunning event of my life. Jim’s death required me to deny God or believe Him, to trust Him or renounce Him. *The lesson is the same for all of us. The context differs.*”

Facing life as a single, facing a job loss or failed plans, whether dealing with tragedy or day-to-day life, the lesson is the same. We will either believe with all of our lives or deny with all our hearts.

With my plans out of the way I am beginning to anticipate God’s plans for this Christmas assured that His celebration will far outshine mine.

The question is the same for all of us: Whose plans are we living? Whose choices are we making? The most stunning lesson of our lives need not occur in the shock of tragedy as it did for Elisabeth Elliot, but we are all forced to choose. If He is God, truly Lord, then He is God of our singleness and His plans are only, always good.

**Marlee Andres has been active in research and free lance writing particularly around women’s issues for several years. She currently is continuing her education towards a master’s in theology.**



Hold fast to dreams, for if  
dreams die, life is a broken-  
winged bird that cannot fly.  
—Langston Hughes

by Ivorie G. Lowe

## Questions and reflections at midlife

I have traveled a long way on the journey to midlife. There have been twists, turns and curves, but there have also been scenic stops that offered inspiration and other travelers who shared themselves and their wisdom. Most of all there has been the living experience itself, which teaches valuable lessons as we travel the highway that is life. Throughout my journey, I have been empowered through my union with God. I draw my strength from God. Now, retired and at the midpoint of my life, I am often given to reflecting on my journey to this station.

I see my life as a journey through several stations. The first stop was the station of my early beginnings, when my parents were the ever present conductors leading me through the ups and downs of childhood and mapping out my life's route through Christian training. My mother and father prayerfully directed, encouraged and taught me. As with all parents, my parents wondered if I had been fully equipped for the journey into adulthood. My mother wondered if I had packed Christian values, honesty, integrity, character and moral fiber in the suitcase for traveling the highway of life. My father often checked for strength, faith, will power and the moral compass. All too soon, it was time to leave the safety of home to board the train bound for college, marriage and motherhood.

When I left home for college, for marriage, and when I embarked on motherhood, I did not know the journey. I had not walked the path. College was a challenge. There were so many things to distract me from my true course. Many girls in the dorms offered quick advice on the easy grade and gave out passports to life in the fast lane. Many of the boys offered tickets to carnal pleasure and Alcohol Alley. My family values and my Christian commitment brought me through.

Armed with my college degree, my Christian commitment and faith in God, I did move on to the next station, marriage. There were 24 years of joy, of laughter, of blissfulness during our marriage. I am smiling as I write this because I remember vividly, almost with all the color of the rainbow, the joy of being married to John. He gave me such happiness, almost an abandonment of reality sometimes. We have a wonderful son, Sheldon, from that union.

Yes, the journey became rough. There were problems with John's health for many, many years. Then John passed away. I am sad when I miss his warmth, his deep caring and love for me. Sheldon misses him too and has now taken to using the name "John," which is also a part of his name. His decision to change his name gives me a feeling of time moving, of the life process being continued. As my son makes his decision and moves to another station, so do I.

Traveling from station to station, I have learned that we are given the power and strength to meet and accomplish the tasks God sets out for us and the challenges the world puts before us. I live now alone with my thoughts, my memories, alone with my things and with my God. He sustains me when all else fails.

I want to digress and tell you a story about my childhood and adulthood thinking. When I was growing up I had a lot of gray strands of hair. Older members of my church and community often told me I would have "good luck." Although I thought it was only superstition, a part of me bought into that and I prayed for the "good luck" to come. I interpreted the "good luck" to be monetary, that I would possibly win the sweepstakes and get thousands of dollars. That never happened!



Nothing in life is to be feared.  
It is only to be understood.  
—Marie Curie

What did happen? I grew up healthy. I married a wonderful man. I have a wonderful son. I saw my husband and son struggle with their health problems. I saw my son make and continue to keep a Christian commitment. I see and hear him communicate with God in reverent prayer. Frederica, a Christian young girl from the high school where I taught, adopted me as her mother and became a part of my family. Over the years, she and her husband have blessed me with three grandchildren. I had 33 years successfully working in education—first as a classroom teacher and the last 23 as a dean of students sharing and learning from students along the way. The journey continued.

I became a part of Community Mennonite Church of Markham. Through the church, I experienced new people. Daily, I observed Christ working through people and me in different ways. I have worked as one of the lay leaders for my congregation. I became a part of a team ministry and participated in bringing the morning message on rotating Sundays. I have taught Sunday school and served as worship leader. The Christ within us is a storehouse of strength and wisdom as we travel.

Another station. In 1979 at Estes Park, Col., I was elected as a member of the Commission on Home Ministry of the General Conference Mennonite Church. This was an opportunity to serve God and Christian brothers and sisters in a new way. I served for many years on the commission and attended many Council of Commissions meetings. Being a part of that commission opened up many opportunities to grow deeper in my faith. It allowed me to meet and talk with others who were miles ahead on their walk with Christ. I talked with some who have made only a few steps, but I gained much inspiration for my journey from fellow Christians. There are no magic formulas for receiving God's guidance, but if we listen, if we pray and trust God, God will give us the direction our lives need.

My service on the commission is ended and I am no longer on the General Board. I have retired from my job. My suitcases sit idly in the closet. While I still serve on a few other boards and still remain active in my church, I have retreated for some introspective time, some time for healing, some time for seeking, for listening to God. For some months now I have tried to shut out some of the demand for my time and just listen. I have gone within for spiritual healing, to have hope renewed, and to explore old dreams. Like Langston Hughes, I too ponder what happens to dreams deferred. I am using this time to pursue almost forgotten dreams, to work at things I passed along the way en route to this station called midlife. At this station, I wait and listen for God's directive.

Cathy Meeks in her book, *I Want Somebody to Know My Name*, says, "A person without hope is a dangerous person." My Christian faith gives me hope. I live for the opportunity to more clearly hear and follow Jesus Christ in my life. I agree with Meeks when she says that a person who knows Jesus in her heart must deal with the question of what it means to follow Jesus. Like Christians everywhere, I am trying to discern that in my own life. Each experience, each encounter with God, each station brings me closer to the answer.

In spite of all my travels, there are still other frontiers to be discovered. The desire to serve in the Peace Corps is ignited again after lying dormant in my heart for more than 30 years. Maybe I could have told Langston that dreams can be reborn. I did a brief food study in Africa for MCC and thought that was the end of this yearning to serve others. I thought I had gotten it out of my system, but old dreams never die. They resurface or maybe it is God calling us to action. Whatever the reason, I am waiting for God to direct me to the next station in my life.

My journey to midlife is a kaleidoscope of joys and sorrow. I cherish the joyfulness and respect the sorrow for it builds character, strength, and gives courage for the next station. Looking back over my life gives me pause. No, I have never won the sweepstakes or the lottery. I have won something more valuable—a life filled with blessings and the opportunity to have Christ as my companion as I travel from station to station on the journey of life.

**Ivorie G. Lowe is from Markham, Ill., and a member of Community Mennonite Church there. She has served as a lay leader in her congregation and on the Commission on Home Ministries (GC), as well as General Board. She is a long-time educator, who served as a teacher and dean of students.**



by Ruth Naylor

## Facing a midlife faith passage

Now I know  
how Noah felt  
when God told him  
to build an ark  
and nobody else  
knew it was going to rain.

It seems so strange  
to prepare for change,  
to close books on my life thus far,  
to sort things out  
and wait for things  
to rearrange.

The rains are coming;  
the feeling  
floods my brain.  
They may be showers that  
merely bring new growth;  
they could be storms  
that wash away past gain.

Help me to learn  
from Noah's faith  
that my world  
can be renewed.  
Help me select  
the needful things  
as I walk on with you.

Ruth Naylor is from Bluffton, Ohio. She is currently interim conference minister for Central District (General Conference).

## Books on midlife

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## Publications

"Words for Worship" by Arlene M. Mark is a new 240-page collection of worship resources. This is a very usable collection of prayers and readings for worship services, well organized around the church year and special occasions. Published by Herald Press, 1996. To order call 1-800-759-4447.



## Women in ministry

**Vicki Penner** was licensed February 11 as pastor at Faith Mennonite Church, Newton, Kan.

**Kay Welsch** is interim pastor at Faith Mennonite Church, Minneapolis.

**Anna-Lisa Salo** was ordained November 12 as pastor at Waters Mennonite Church, Lively, Ont.

**Beth Ranck Yoder** was ordained for pastoral ministry at Perkasio (Pa.) Mennonite Church on January 21.

In MCC

## Women's work

Women's Concerns is not the only section of MCC working at women's issues. Many, many MCC programs and workers address women's issues in their work. In this new feature we plan to share brief notes about MCC's work with and for women around the world.

- In Kingston, Jamaica, SALT volunteer Tonya Wenger works at the Women's Centre as a counselor to teenage mothers. The center provides a school program they attend during and after their pregnancies. Tonya says she finds the work challenging yet tremendously rewarding as she learns from and builds relationships with young Jamaican mothers.
- In Laos, MCC is working to overcome difficulties women face by supporting two Integrated Rural Development Projects. There are 12 villages in each project. These programs use a participatory approach and are designed around the needs of the villages. Projects include providing vaccinations for pregnant women and children, and birth spacing programs, designed to help families plan the best time to have children. New rice hulling machines can save women as much as two hours daily from the traditional method. By seeking out and supporting the women in needs assessment and decision making in village level projects, MCC Lao is both informally and formally granting empowerment to women.



## News and verbs

Susan Mark Landis has been appointed **minister of peace and justice** for the Mennonite Church by the General Board. Her responsibilities include encouraging congregations and conferences to work at peace in their communities.

Valerie Rempel has been appointed assistant professor of **history and theology** at Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary, Fresno, Calif.

Marisa Yoder, science teacher at Bethany Christian High in Goshen, Ind., was named National Secondary **Conservation Education Teacher of the Year** by the National Association of Conservation Districts.

Sylvia Shirk Charles will begin duties as campus **minister at Goshen College** in August. She replaces Martha Smith Good who has served in that position since 1988.

Awanda Pritts has been named **director of human resources** at Mennonite Publishing House in Scottdale, Pa.

The Association of **Mennonites in the Arts** is beginning a newsletter, to be edited by Cynthia Yoder of New York City. The association has 400 members. For information, contact Philip K. Clemens, 17716 Route 89, Corry, PA 16047.

**Dancing at the Table: Re-Imagining the Church**, to be June 28–30, 1996, is an international gathering of Mennonite and Church of the Brethren congregations and individuals seeking a place of welcome for gay, lesbian and bisexual Christians. The weekend of worship, music, storytelling and workshops will be in North Manchester, Ind. Speakers, worship leaders and storytellers include: Sharon Knechel, Melanie May, Helen Quintela, Debbie Eisenbise, Lee Krahenbuhl, LaVerne Church of the Brethren, Germantown Mennonite Church, St. Paul Mennonite Fellowship, Deanna Brown, Anita Smith Buckwalter, Bertha Landers, Shawn Kirchner and Jane Miller. For more information contact the Supportive Congregations Network, PO Box 6300, Minneapolis, MN 55406; telephone, 612-305-0315; e-mail SCNetwork@aol.com.

(continued on back page)

Illustrations in this issue were drawn by Teresa Pankratz of Chicago. Please do not reproduce without permission.

A resource packet on abortion has been produced by MCC U.S. Peace and Justice Ministries. It includes statistics, stories, Bible study and suggestions for ways to respond to this issue. Order from MCC Akron Resource Library, PO Box 500, Akron, PA 17501-0500; phone (717) 859-1151. Cost is \$4U.S./\$5 Cdn. Pennsylvania residents add 6 percent sales tax. A Canadian abortion packet is available from MCC Canada, 134 Plaza Drive, Winnipeg, MB R3T 5K9; phone (204) 261-6381. Cost is \$5 Cdn./\$4 U.S.

The Women's Theological Center, an organization of women working together from **womanist and feminist theological perspectives** to eliminate racism and establish justice, publishes **two periodicals**. "The Brown Papers" is a

monthly publication of theological essays. The "WTC Quarterly Newsletter" contains essays, reflections, poetry, etc., to provide insight and inspiration for women and men committed to making connections between faith and social justice. The center will send sample copies on request. Contact Women's Theological Center, Box 1200, Boston, MA 02117-1200; 617-536-8782.

**Living Mirror: Young Mennonite Writers**, a new collection of fiction and poetry by Mennonites ages 8 to 18, was published by the third biennial Mennonite Arts Weekend in Cincinnati, Ohio, in February. Cost is \$5 U.S. Copies of the 1994 edition are available for \$3.50, or purchase both for \$6. Proceeds support the arts weekend. Send requests with payment to: Mennonite Arts Weekend, c/o Suzanne Marie Hitt, 3981 Woodridge Blvd. Apt. 10, Fairfield, OH 45014-7570.

WOMEN'S CONCERNS REPORT is published bimonthly by the MCC Committees on Women's Concerns. We believe that Jesus Christ teaches equality of all persons. By sharing information and ideas, the committees strive to promote new relationships and corresponding supporting structures through which women and men can grow toward wholeness and mutuality. Articles and views presented in REPORT do not necessarily reflect official positions of the Committees on Women's Concerns.

WOMEN'S CONCERNS REPORT is edited by Kristina Mast Burnett. Layout by Beth Oberholtzer.

Subscription cost is \$12 U.S./\$15 Cdn. for one year or \$20 U.S./\$25 Cdn. for two years. Send all subscriptions, correspondence and address changes to Editor, MCC Women's Concerns. P.O. Box 500, Akron, PA 17501-0500; telephone 717-859-3889; fax 717-859-3875. Canadian subscribers may pay in Canadian currency.

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